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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
MFA FINAL VISUAL PRESENTATION

BY

ERIN RORI SCHWAB

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN  
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

DRAWING

DEPARTMENT OF ART AND DESIGN

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL 2006



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Final Visual Presentation

Submitted by Erin Rori Schwab in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Fine Arts.



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I hereby release the following works for incorporation into the University Collections,  
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| TITLE                | DATE | MEDIUM           | SIZE             |
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| "Tilia x Flavescens" | 2006 | Charcoal Drawing | 153 cm x 91.5 cm |

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When I was five, my mother gave me a 2 x 4 foot section of garden in the spot where her radishes would have been. I had such a garden plot until I moved to my first apartment where my 4<sup>th</sup> floor deck was the same size of that first piece of earth. I mourned the loss of being able to grow things, and after that first missed growing season, the attempt to regain what I had lost found its outlet in my art. Drawing is a lot like gardening. One nurtures a plant in the same way that one nurtures a drawing, starting off with an idea and ending with hands dirty, but filled with feeling for the creation.

Flora and fauna have been the theme in my work ever since, but the motivation has changed from strict visual understanding of what I was seeing to the desire to understand the why behind my continual exploration into plants and the medium of drawing. My research has led me to look beyond the instant gratification of the lush surface to a beauty that is less familiar, to the unseen essence of the plant - its roots. The root is the true source of life for the plant and yet this truth is commonly overshadowed by the search for the effortless beauty of the structure above ground. Drawing is in the same boat; historically it was used only as an exercise or to prepare preliminary layers for other media. Drawing's visual simplicity is often overshadowed by other more traditionally commanding art forms. Yet it is the quiet fragility, the ability to be both finished and unfinished, which compels me to study the parallels within horticulture and drawing.

Peeling away the predictability that accompanies both drawing and gardening has led me to use media that has a visually quieting affect. By eliminating the detail, the objects fragility and quintessence are more apparent. The techniques I employ using porcelain and charcoal have a repetitions and sometimes tedious process involved with their use. These mediums are weighted down by their history of routine; charcoal is used to sketch with, porcelain to make teacups, roots are beneath the soil. By stripping away the obviousness, I am offering the viewer the opportunity



to experience these objects and these mediums in a new way. But through all the reinventions, a sense of familiarity prevails that doesn't rely on what we see or knew. The familiarity no longer relies on knowing what we are observing, as much as it relies on what we feel while in the presence of these images and objects. Every eye sees objects differently. Human vision is bound up in everything that has ever happened to us as individuals. We see and feel simultaneously, and it is in that second that we feel, before we know, that we can gain insight into a different way of seeing and knowing.

Bound up in that knowing is my belief that hands have their own intelligence. The skill of the hand that remembers a passage of charcoal or the feel of wet porcelain in a way that the intellect can't define in simple steps is a way of understanding. As an artist, I am devoted not only to an intellectual concept or idea, but to the unification and intertwining of the physicality of making and the idea. Being devoted to the act of hand making in a society that believes so completely in reason and the ease afforded by technology can be seen as a small act of questioning or subversion. The resulting object itself becomes the explanation through the labor embedded in its existence. The danger inherent in a culture that is too far removed from the act of physically making is the creation of a society that is disconnected from the very things that keep people and plants alive.

When sensitively approaching nature, one does so with a preference for first hand experience over abstraction.

It's the abstract, heroic voice of theory that the green thumb distrusts. He knows that to lean heavily on abstraction in the garden is just another form of over cultivation. Theories, whether they be scientific or astrological, are made by people and imposed on nature- they're all thumb. And though a theory may be powerful and contain truth, it is never more than a representation of nature. The





good gardener knows better than to mistake it for the real, green, irreducible thing.<sup>1</sup>

When I protectively coat or render an object's portrait I hope to preserve not only the roots as objects, but also the experience of finding and caring for them. Meticulously coated and drawn, the roots become transitory icons of nature, remnants of an attempt to resurrect the fragile and unobserved life that these roots once had.

As the artist, how much input I have in the alteration of the subject through drawing depends on how emotionally connected I am to the original object. How much can I strip down an object before it is no longer that to which I was connected? Being emotionally connected to an object, beyond visual intrigue, both enhances and interferes with the realization of the image. I find myself trying to do justice not only to the image I am creating, but also to myself and the precious fragment that fueled the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan "Second Nature"(New York: Dell Pub. 1991) 153-152



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